

Can God use sex for our sanctification?

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From the book

Frequently Asked Questions About Sexuality, The Bible, and The Church: Plain Talk about Tough Issues

A collection of essays considering the appropriate participation of gay and lesbian Presbyterians in church life and leadership.

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Conservative Christians object to same-sex marriage because they want marriage to show visible holiness. That idea is useful because it prompts all Christians to reflect on the sort of holiness that marriage teaches and displays. Here I reflect on the theology of marriage under the rubric of sanctification. This approach owes much to the tradition of the Orthodox Church, which regards marriage as a way of participating in the divine life not by way of sexual satisfaction but by way of ascetic self-denial for the sake of more desirable goods. Theologically understood, marriage is not primarily for the control of lust or for procreation. It is a discipline whereby we give ourselves to another for the sake of growing in holiness – in short, for God. Marriage is a way in which God can train human beings – bodies and all – to “glorify God and enjoy him forever,” as Westminster puts it.

In this respect marriage and monasticism are two forms of the same discipline, as the Orthodox writer Paul Evdokimov has argued. They are both ways of committing ourselves to others – a spouse or a monastic community – from whom we cannot easily escape. Both the monastic and the married give themselves over to be transformed by the perceptions of others; both seek to learn, over time, by the discipline of living with others something about how God perceives human beings.

Rowan Williams has written, “Grace, for the Christian believer, is a transformation that depends in large part on knowing yourself to be seen in a certain way: as significant, as wanted. The whole story of creation, incarnation, and our incorporation into the fellowship of Christ’s body tells us that God desires us, as if we were God, as if we were that unconditional response to God’s giving that God’s [Son] makes in the life of the Trinity. We are created [and we marry] so that we may be caught up in this, so that we may grow into the

wholehearted love of God by learning that God loves us as God loves God." Like all forms of asceticism, this is a high-risk endeavor. It can expose the worst in people – so that it can be healed.

Sexuality, in short, is for sanctification, that is, for God. It is to be a means by which God catches human beings up into the community of God's Spirit and the identity of God's child. Monogamy and monasticism are two ways of embodying features of the triune life in which God initiates, responds to and celebrates love.

Monasticism is for people who find a bodily, sexual sanctification first and foremost in the desirous perception of God. Marriage is for people who find themselves transformed by the desirous perception of another human being made in God's image. In a marital or monastic community, the parties commit themselves to practicing faith, hope and charity in a situation in which those virtues get plenty of opportunity to be exercised.

This way of understanding the Christian life obviously takes seriously the embodied character of human life. And embodiment implies diversity. The Holy

Spirit characteristically rests on bodies: the body of Christ in Jesus, in the church, in the sacraments and in the saints. As the Spirit forms the bodies of human beings into the body of Christ, she characteristically gathers the diverse and diversifies the corporate, making members of one body.

We can see the Holy Spirit working for a harmonious diversity as she hovers over the waters in creation. Let us suppose that "Be fruitful and multiply" applies to the

commands "Let the earth put forth vegetation" and "Let the waters bring forth swarms" and "Let the earth bring forth everything that creeps upon the ground" (Gen. 1:26,1:11, 1:20, 1:24). In all these cases, the earth and the waters bring forth things different from themselves, not just more dirt and more water. And in all these cases, they bring forth a variety of things: one might almost translate the phrase as "Be fruitful and diversify."

What kind of diversity or otherness does the Spirit evoke? Does it evoke the diversity represented by homosexual persons? Clearly, the majority opinion of the church has said no – that sort of diversity in creation is not the work of the Spirit. But it is not at all clear that such a judgment is necessary.

Conservatives will suppose that by invoking the diversity of creation I am begging the question. And yet, if the earth is to bring forth not according to its

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kind (more dirt) but creatures different from dirt and from each other, then the burden of proof lies on the other side. It needs to be shown that one of God's existing entities somehow cannot do its part in communicating and representing God's goodness and do so precisely in its finitude, by its limitations. What are the limits on accepting diversity as capable of representing God's goodness? Conservatives and liberals would agree that a diversity evoked by the Holy Spirit must be a holy diversity, a diversity ordered to the good, one that brings forth the fruits of the Spirit, primarily faith, hope and charity.

Given that no human beings exhibit faith, hope and charity on their own, but only in community, it is hard to argue that gay and lesbian people ought to be left out of social arrangements, such as marriage, in which these virtues are trained. In the words of Gregory of Nazianzus, our human limitations are intended for our good. So too, then, the limitations ascribed to same-sex couples, or for that matter cross-sex couples: in Gregory's words, their "very limitations are a form of training" toward communicating and representing the good. The trick is to turn these created limits toward the appreciation of the goods represented by others. Our differences are meant to make us yearn for and love one another. Difference is for blessing.

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Under conditions of sin, otherness can lead to curse rather than blessing, to hostility rather than hospitality. Certainly there has been enough cursing and hostility to go around in the sexuality debates. But as created, otherness is intended for blessing and hospitality.

For large sections of various Christian traditions, blessing does not float overhead. Sanctification comes through concrete practices of asceticism, a discipline or training through which lesser goods serve greater ones. To reflect Trinitarian holiness, sanctification must involve community. It involves commitments to a community from which one can't easily escape, whether monastic, nuptial or congregational.

Gay and lesbian people who commit themselves to a community – to a church, or to one another as partners – do so to seek greater goods, to embark upon a discipline, to donate themselves to a greater social meaning. Living out these commitments under conditions of sin, in a community from which one can't easily escape – especially a community such as marriage and monasticism – is not likely to be straightforwardly improving. The community from which one can't

easily escape is morally risky. It tends to expose the worst in people. The hope is that community exposes the worst in people in order that the worse can be healed.

Christians will see such healing as the work of Christ. Many Christian traditions portray Christ as a physician who must probe people's wounds in order to heal them. The probings of Jesus, the Great Physician, occur most readily in communities to which people bind themselves. The healing work of Christ in community brings both great risk and the promise of holiness.

For the risk of commitment to be worth it and to have the best chance of success, the community must have plenty of time and be made up of the right sort of people. Growth takes a lifetime. The right sort of people are those who will succeed in exposing and healing one another's flaws.

For gay and lesbian people, the right sort of otherness is unlikely to be represented by someone of the opposite sex, because only someone of the opposite, not opposite, sex will get deep enough into the relationship to expose one's vulnerabilities and inspire the trust that healing requires. The crucial question is, What sort of created diversity will lead one to holiness?

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The answer is no doubt as various as creation itself. But certainly same-sex couples find the right spur to vulnerability, self-exposure, and the long and difficult commitment over time to discover themselves in the perceptions of another – they find all this in someone of the same sex. Theologically, says David McCarthy, a homosexual orientation is this: "Gay men and lesbians are persons who encounter the other (and thus themselves) in relation to persons of the same sex." Some people, therefore, are called to same-sex partnerships for their own sanctification. Opposite-sex partnerships wouldn't work for them, because those would evade rather than establish the right kind of transformative vulnerability.

The difference between members of a same-sex couple is not "merely psychological," but also an embodied difference, if only because sexual response is nothing if not something done bodily. But even embodied difference cannot be reduced to male-female complementarity, because that would leave Jesus a deficient human being. Jesus did not need a female other half to be fully human. (This point raises the issue of what singleness is for, but that's a question for another day.)

If this account is correct, then it turns out that conservatives wish to deprive same-sex couples not so much of satisfaction as of sanctification. But that is contradictory, because so far as I know no conservative has ever seriously argued that same-sex couples need sanctification any less than cross-sex couples do. It is at least contradictory to attempt in the name of holiness to deprive people of the means of their own sanctification.

Conservatives often claim it's dangerous to practice homosexuality, because it might be a sin. I want to propose that the danger runs both ways. It is more than contradictory, it may even be resisting the Spirit, to attempt to deprive same-sex couples of the discipline of marriage and not to celebrate same-sex weddings. As the king asks a guest in the parable of the wedding feast, "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?" (Mt. 22:1-13)

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